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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 4045
INFO RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAKU 001244

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FOR EUR/CARC

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KISL](#) [AJ](#)
SUBJECT: RECENT STEPS HIGHLIGHT GOAJ'S ATTEMPT TO CONTROL
ISLAM

REF: BAKU 01069

Classified By: DCM Donald Lu for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: In September, two television programs about Islam were canceled or temporarily suspended, reportedly in response to GOAJ pressure. In an unrelated incident, the rector of the Azerbaijani Teachers' Institute in September sought to keep veiled female students from attending classes.

Both parties reached a compromise, whereby the students are allowed to wear the hijab during Ramazan, but will stop wearing it after the holiday. In still another separate incident in August, the State Committee for Work with Religious Associations temporarily closed 19 official madrassas to reexamine their curriculum; the official madrassas remain closed as of early October. End Summary.

¶2. (C) In late September, during Ramazan, two television programs about Islam were abruptly canceled or temporarily suspended. ANS' "Allah Haggi" ("I Swear to God") and local Public Television's "Juma Sohbeti" ("Friday Talks") were suspended within several days of each other. Local contacts report that the GOAJ pressured both stations to suspend or revise their programs. An ANS manager told PAO that Presidential Administration Political Advisor Ali Hasanov told ANS' management to stop "Allah Haggi," claiming that the order had come from above. Religious freedom activist Ilgar Ibrahimoglu also told us that instructions had come "from the top" to shut down the ANS program. Ibrahimoglu said ANS probably will broadcast a new program in place of "Allah Haggi" in the coming weeks, but the content will not be exclusively religious. The host of Public Television's "Juma Sohbeti" Elshan Mustafayev, told us the station's program will probably be reinstated, but the substance will be significantly altered. Previously, the show featured discussion of religious issues by religious scholars and commentators. Under the new format, religious issues will not be discussed or religious scholars will not participate.

¶3. (C) Also in late September, several veiled female students were prevented from attending courses at the Azerbaijani Teachers' Institute. The Institute's rector Agiya Nakhchivanly said she was concerned by the growing number of women wearing the hijab, observing that there was an increase from five to 18 veiled students over the past year. According to Ibrahimoglu, representatives from the Ministry of Education were involved in brokering a compromise between Nakhchivanly and the veiled students. Under the terms of the agreement, the students are permitted to wear the hijab during Ramazan, but they will give stop wearing the veil after Ramazan. We believe this episode is largely a matter of an overzealous rector, and it does not appear linked to any broader GOAJ "campaign" against the hijab. (There is no

legal prohibition against the hijab in educational institutions in Azerbaijan. The only GOAJ prohibition is that the hijab must not be worn in photographs on official identity documents, but religiously observant women report that it is nearly impossible for veiled women to obtain government jobs.)

14. (C) In August, the State Committee for Work with Religious Associations (SCWRA) temporarily closed 19 official madrassas. Local religious affairs journalist Kenan Guliyev -- a devout Shia with links to local Shia communities and a recent IVP participant -- told us the SCWRA closed the madrassas in order to review their curriculum. Guliyev suspected that some of the 19 would not be reopened. As an aside, Guliyev observed that there are approximately 200 unofficial madrassas paralleling the recently closed 19 madrassas. During a October 9 iftar hosted by the Ambassador for religious contacts, we heard that the 19 official madrassas remain closed as the SCWRA is continuing to evaluate their curriculum.

15. (C) Comment: The suspension of the two television programs and the examination of the madrassa's curriculum demonstrates the GOAJ's instinct for seeking to monopolize religious discussion and education. In our view, elements in the GOAJ maintain a Soviet worldview that perceives religion as a dangerous genie to be contained (reftel). In particular, these elements are inherently uncomfortable with unregulated religious discussion. Local contacts speculated that timing of these recent crackdowns may be linked to recent events in Turkey and the GOAJ's discomfort with the Justice and Development Party,s (AKP) growing strength in a state previously viewed by the GOAJ as a model of secular Islam.

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